

THE PROGRAM

LETTERS ON LEADERSHIP

To access our full archive of The Program Letters on Leadership, please visit [Letters on Leadership - TheProgram.org](http://LettersonLeadership-TheProgram.org).

- LETTER ON LEADERSHIP #88 -



Talent allows us to win “games” on athletic fields or in business. Talent allows us to be good in life. Therefore, refuse to settle for it! Be great. High-achieving people and teams don't want just to win "games"; we want to compete for championships, but competing for championships is not just about our talent. Talent is important - it allows us to be good and is our price of admission. However, to compete for championships and to be world-class, we must commit to getting “that much better” every day (put your thumb and forefinger two inches apart; that is “that much better”). We get that much better every day by making a commitment to developing world-class habits. As Aristotle famously said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” Ironically, those with the most talent often have some of the worst habits.

One reason is a “disease” called "too-good-too-early." At younger ages and lower levels of competition, talent is usually enough to not only get by but even dominate; some athletes are stronger, faster, and more skilled than their competition. Some students are just

smarter than other classmates. At higher levels, we still need talent, but we also need championship habits if we are going to achieve everything that our talent level affords us. Unfortunately, talented individuals often think they know better. These individuals have focused so intensely on their own strengths and weaknesses that they feel they know themselves better than anyone else. When faced with adversity, they often revert to what worked so well for them at lower levels. Their lower-level habits. Second, the more talent we possess, the bigger our comfort zone. We can do well, and we can win “games” by doing the things we have always done. Yes, we will continue to leverage some of the habits we have developed to help us get to where we are, but to get where we *want* to get will require us to change some of our habits. This change will cause discomfort. And many people don’t want it or won’t accept it.

In 2004, The Program Lead Instructor, Mike Mendoza, was operating as a part of the First Reconnaissance Battalion in Fallujah, Iraq. Every Recon Marine had been assessed and selected to join the unit. They had all been through specialized training and schooling and were continually challenged to be the toughest and most lethal asset in the United States Marine Corps. While conducting a vehicular patrol one day, Mike and his teammates noticed that the usually busy streets were nearly empty, and the few locals they saw gave them menacing looks as they passed. Shortly after, chaos erupted. Mike and his teammates were caught in a coordinated ambush. Their vehicles were raked with machine gun fire, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) exploded in their midst. The Marines' lead vehicle exploded from a direct hit by an RPG, and they began taking fire from all directions. Mike and his teammates were at a decision point: fight or flight? At this point, most people would be overcome with panic, lose emotional control, and flee. In fact, the enemy counted on that reaction.

Unfortunately for them, Marines don’t react that way. It isn’t our habit. On the order from his platoon commander, Mike and his Recon teammates left the safety of their vehicles to attack through the ambush. Mike led five of his teammates on an assault across an open field, up a 10-foot berm, and across a canal filled with chest-deep mud, killing the enemy as they moved. When his teammates went down or were neutralized, Mike continued the assault by himself with complete disregard for his own safety. Mike would receive the Navy Cross for his heroic actions. Mike will tell you, though, that his actions were not heroic; his actions were habitual.

Mike’s unit had world-class habits called Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). They had an SOP for the placement of medical kits on their bodies so that if a Marine is injured, their teammate knows exactly where to find the necessary aid even in the chaos of battle. They had SOPs for the placement of full magazines on their fighting kit and an SOP for where to place empty ones. They had an SOP on how they would fight if caught in an ambush. These unit-wide habits allow the team to operate as one team with one heartbeat, not just when things are going well but, more importantly, when in situations where Mike and his team found themselves. It is not just elite military units that have world-class habits. All world-class teams have them!

It isn’t enough to just have them, though; when we witness a teammate not following one, we must hold them accountable. We must also remember to recognize our teammates when they are meeting the standard. Doing both helps them become the best version of themselves and helps the team do the same. Most people will never find themselves in a coordinated ambush. However, whether your team's chosen battlefield is the basketball

court or boardroom, a commitment to developing world-class habits and then holding each other accountable to achieving them will help ensure world-class results. It will be uncomfortable to do so.

Growth always is...

Attack!

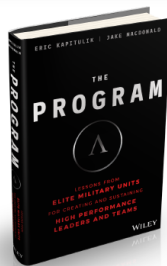
Mike Mendoza

Instructor

"Letters on Leadership" are published periodically by The Program, a leadership development and team-building company that works with the nation's leading corporations as well as professional and collegiate athletic teams.

For information on developing better leaders and more cohesive teams at your organization, visit <http://www.theprogram.org>.

THE PROGRAM BOOK



THE PROGRAM, CEO, Eric Kapitulik, and Lead Instructor, Jake MacDonald, share great wisdom and insight on building world class teams in the co-authored book, The Program, Lessons from Elite Military Units for Creating and Sustaining High Performance Leaders and Teams.

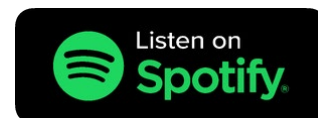
**PURCHASE
BOOK HERE**

#THEPROGRAMPODCAST



PODCAST

Dive deeper into your knowledge of leadership by following #THEPROGRAMPODCAST. Listen to great insights from corporate leaders, coaches, authors and our Program teammates by subscribing and listening to our podcast. Follow by clicking the buttons below.



SERVICES PROVIDED



GREAT TEAMMATES. GREAT LEADERS. WORLD-CLASS TEAMS.



The Program, LLC, 48 Quinebaug Road, North Grosvenordale, CT 06255, USA, (781) 281-0751

[Unsubscribe](#) [Manage preferences](#)